

Building Positive Support Groups



Ground Rules for Support Groups

The purpose of a support group is to provide individuals with an opportunity to interact with and learn from each other, to give and gain emotional support, and to offer and receive practical help with a problem that is common to all members. For this to happen, an atmosphere of trust and concern must be created. One thing a group leader can do to help create this atmosphere and to ensure the success of a support group is to assist the participants in establishing ground rules. Ground rules may be determined by the group leader or facilitator, or by the entire group. Ground rules serve as guidelines for the actions and conduct of the individual members. Some suggested, and very effective, ground rules are:

1. *All discussions are confidential.* Participants need assurance that whatever they share (feelings, problems, etc.) with the group will not be discussed outside of the support group. If members are assured of this, discussions will be much more open and members will tend to have a better experience.

2. *Everyone has a right to talk, to be heard, and to not be interrupted while they are talking.* It should be clearly stated "early on" that everyone is expected to share concerns, feelings, and ideas with the group and that no one will be allowed to monopolize the time. Every member has something important to contribute.

3. *Group members must trust and care for each other.* Trust among members will allow individuals to say what they want to say, not what they think people want to hear, with little fear of being judged or rejected. Care is expressed among members when one or more members take the time to talk with and listen to an individual who is upset during or after a meeting. Caring is expressed in "reaching out" to others.

4. *Group members must accept each other's feelings.* Expressing feelings can relieve pressure and members should be encouraged to express all feelings: anger, sadness, guilt, confusion, relief, happiness, etc. While the facts surrounding the feelings may not be "real," the feelings are very real. To discount them ("You shouldn't feel that way.") is to reject the reality of them.

5. *Group members have the right to disagree with each other.* There are no right answers. People are different and have different ideas and opinions. These are based on different past experiences. Group members must realize that they are not looking for one right answer—what is right for one person may be wrong for another. If a discussion gets heated, members should be reminded that there are different viewpoints on every topic.

6. *Group members should "give notice" if they plan to leave the group.* If a person chooses to leave or must leave the group before it is terminated, it is best to inform the group of this. The person should tell the group that he or she plans to no longer attend and why. This can be done at a meeting or with a written notice.

These ground rules are not all inclusive. Groups may choose to set some or all of these and include others that are relevant to their particular circumstances and goals. At any rate, it is recommended that some ground rules be set to help the group remain focused and to accomplish the desired goals.

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The value of group support when someone has experienced a significant change in lifestyle, or suffered a loss, has been adequately demonstrated. By learning to reveal ourselves—to share our concerns and feelings—we find that we are not alone or unique in our experience. Others have many of the same feelings and thoughts that we do. The opportunity to share both negative and positive concerns with others is therapeutic as well as educational.

This bulletin will describe the structure and development of positive support groups to help address some of the unmet needs and rapid changes that are affecting people and their communities. The usefulness of support groups in helping to meet some of the pressing personal needs of people living on Ohio farms and in Ohio communities has become increasingly apparent.

Organization of the Group

Careful planning by the group organizer before the first meeting is essential in achieving constructive results for the group. Some organizational items to consider in setting up a group are:

◆ Purpose and description of the group.

The purpose of a support group is to provide members with an opportunity to interact with and learn from each other, to give and gain emotional support, and to offer and receive practical help with a problem that is common to all members. The primary focus of a support group is on communication between members. An atmosphere that encourages members to seek and give information, suggestions or opinions, and to share concerns and feelings is necessary.

An open system of communication must be promoted because each member's concerns must be heard and accepted. A title that is appropriate for the group's function should be used as a means of identifying and clarifying the group's purpose (e.g., Protection of the Rural Community Lifestyle; Family Farm and Community Understanding; Working Through Rural Family Stress).

◆ Membership of the group

It is important to remember that a support group functions best when members have similar backgrounds and concerns. Consequently, more than one support group may be necessary for a community. An individual or group may decide to structure one support group for

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farmers and ranchers; another for small-business owners; another for bankers and lenders; and yet another for rural homemakers. Each group deals with concerns specific to the people who have joined. Upon completion of a successful group experience, it is possible that members from different groups may want to work through common problems, feelings and concerns by joining together to share them with each other. Greater interaction between participants is experienced in small groups.

A group that has too many members discourages individual sharing and creates a tendency to depend on the facilitators. Also, more aggressive and vocal members often attempt to dominate interaction. On the other hand, if the group is too small, it may lack momentum and cease to meet when several members are absent. A desired group size is usually from eight to no more than twelve. More than twelve people tends to make the support group unwieldy. If more than twelve people are interested in being members of the support group, serious consideration should be given to forming more than one group.

Each participant must accept responsibility to the group in terms of attendance and participation. The success of the group depends on

each individual's commitment to fellow group members.

◆ Recruitment of members

Individuals need to know about the existence of the group and the type of service it offers. Generally, this is best achieved through informal means such as word of mouth, or through referral by friends, clergy, or community agencies. If some individuals are unfamiliar or suspicious of the idea of group sharing, it may be necessary to make personal contact with them. A straightforward explanation of the group's purpose may be effective in encouraging people to give it a try.

An appropriate flyer might be designed and mailed to community churches, agencies, schools and service organizations, or posted on community bulletin boards. This publication should include the group's purpose, meeting time, place and dates of the meetings.



Another effective method is to hold an awareness or orientation meeting to inform people about the group and to allow them to sign up if they are interested.

Careful work with media sources (radio, newspapers, television) can capture people's attention and interest (e.g., an appropriate feature story including the announcement of the proposed support group in the newspaper). Follow-up stories in the newspaper help remind people of the group's existence, provide continued community interest, and encourage participation and support as well as validation in future groups. You can use Public Service Announcements on local radio stations to announce your meeting time and place.

◆ Leadership of the Group

Support groups can be started by professionals (e.g., ministers, mental health workers, Extension staff members), or by one or more individuals who take the initiative and invite friends or neighbors to a get-together. No matter who starts the group, the organizer is responsible for several tasks: recruiting members; locating and providing resources; and planning and coordinating.

When recruiting members, it is recommended that three to five potential members be identified and contacted personally. Remember that these people should have similar backgrounds and concerns. Each of these people can then assist in informing others about the group and recruiting members. Local, state, and national resources should be identified and information about them (name, address, phone number, and services offered) should be provided to the group. For example, addresses and phone numbers of local agencies, professionals (e.g., ministers and counselors) and service organizations that can assist with issues and concerns the group might have are important for the group to know. It would also be wise to identify and contact two or three local ministers

or mental health professionals who would be willing to take emergency calls if someone in the group experiences an emotional problem the group can't handle. You contact these professionals not because you expect difficulties to arise but to be prepared in case they do. Other resources to be identified include tools and materials (e.g., books, films, videotapes) that individuals can use at home or that can be used as a discussion starter and source of technical knowledge for future meetings.

The organizer of the support group also has responsibility for choosing a meeting place and time, notifying participants, and being the facilitator for the first meeting. Consider the factors of space, location, and atmosphere when selecting a location for the meeting. Also consider the membership—would they feel more comfortable meeting in a home or a community meeting place? Be sure that everyone who has expressed an interest in the support group is notified about the first meeting several days in advance.

The first meeting sets the stage for the group's future. During this meeting the facilitator "structures" the group, that is, reviews the purpose and goals of a support group, what the members can and cannot expect from participation in the group, and sets some basic ground rules (e.g., confidentiality, shared lead-

ership, and acceptance of feelings). Decisions the group needs to make, or at least consider, during the first meeting are when and where subsequent meetings will be held, what discussion materials or topics will be beneficial for the members, and what format the group will use. Will the organizer of the group also be the facilitator for the group or will members take turns hosting the group and preparing the discussions or programs? Finally, the group should agree upon a length of commitment. They may choose to meet three to six times and at the end of that time decide whether to continue getting together.

The group leader or facilitator "sets the stage" for effective group functioning. Some of the skills a leader will find helpful in getting a support group started are:

- Nurturing an atmosphere of friendship, mutual trust, respect and warmth. This is done by expressing one's own ideas and feelings openly and honestly, and encouraging group members to do the same.
- Being comfortable with the expression of emotions and being a model for dealing with such emotions. This includes listening to other's thoughts and feelings and not denying or ignoring them.
- Maintaining a nonjudgmental atmosphere. Judgment is not



passed by anyone in the group on the contributions of another member. In no way—verbally or nonverbally—would a person be made to feel they said or did the wrong thing.

- **Universalizing.** This process helps the group become aware that many of their questions and concerns are similar to those of others. In other words, they are not alone.
- **Using feedback.** Feedback includes comments and suggestions from the members as well as nonverbal behavior (e.g., boredom, conflict, absences, disinterest). It allows members to see how they are perceived by other members.
- **Summarizing each meeting.** A brief summary can help participants understand what has been expressed, integrate what they have learned, clarify mistaken impressions, and bring about cohesiveness.

Although the facilitator does not have sole responsibility for the success of the group, he or she acts as a catalyst for the group. The skills of the leader often determine the effectiveness of a support group.

Group Process

It is important for group members to understand that they are not operating as autonomous individuals but as group members. It is not communication *to* people, but *with* them. Each member must assume some responsibility for the

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accomplishment of the group goal. This includes sharing personal ideas and opinions openly in the group setting, *and* being open to the ideas and opinions of others.

As group members listen and consider various alternatives, a greater number of the members will begin to feel responsible for contributing to a successful group outcome. Research indicates that a low-quality solution that has good acceptance can be more effective than a higher-quality solution that lacks acceptance.

Group Communication

In a support group, effective communication is a very important element and is necessary for the group goals to be achieved. Generally, group members will not be familiar with or currently be employing effective communication skills in their interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is important that the facilitator be familiar with good communication and listening techniques and be willing to model and teach these skills to members. Some of the important skills are:

■ Listening and paraphrasing

Effective listening is a critical part of communication. It includes the ability to do these things: a) reflectively listen to others; b) paraphrase; and c) identify and reflect the feelings of others. These skills facilitate an individual's ability to effectively interact with and understand others.

A person learns to reflectively listen by paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is rewording a thought or message that has been expressed without changing the meaning. This technique helps a person be sure that he or she understands the meaning of what another person is trying to convey. To help group members develop this skill, the facilitator can have each member summarize the remarks of the previous speaker before he or she makes a statement. The facilitator should

initiate this exercise by making a statement and then asking group members to reflect back what was said. Group members should be encouraged to practice this skill in all interpersonal relationships so that it becomes more "natural" to them.

Effective listening is a critical part of communication.

■ Sorting content and feelings

People have a need for others to understand what they are trying to communicate. Too often only the content of the message is recognized while the feelings and meaning behind the content are ignored. By listening for "feeling" words, as well as ideas, individuals can further clarify messages.

In a support group, individuals will do a great deal of work learning to recognize and cope with their feelings. In the beginning, the facilitator can encourage the practice of expressing feelings by limiting the group to a few feeling words such as: "mad," "sad," "glad," "hurt," "ashamed," "afraid." This can be accomplished by asking each group member to make a feeling statement using each of these six words.

Avoid using words such as "good," "bad," "okay," and "terrific," which may carry a judgment quality. The goal is for members to become more comfortable in using "feeling" words and to be able to be "tuned in" to feeling words as other group members become more confident in expressing themselves.

When group members are able to recognize and understand each other's feelings, they are able to empathize with one another. Empathy—the ability to "see through

other people's eyes" or to "walk in the other person's shoes"—is another key ingredient in support group efforts. This skill takes concentration and practice, but helps others realize that their situations and feelings are not unique, and others in the group may be experiencing the same emotions. This realization can be therapeutic in itself.

■ Expressing understanding and empathy

Individual responses to sharing feelings in a group setting may be evaluated in terms of how much they reveal: a) understanding; b) accurate empathy; or c) a level of probable helpfulness. The ability to evaluate responses is an important skill to have because it enables individuals to give effective feedback to others and to evaluate their own communication responses. One method used to evaluate responses is the *Understanding/Empathy Scale*. This scale separates responses into three levels of helpfulness (see table below).

A "case method" will best illustrate these three response levels. Imagine that a participant makes the statement, "I feel afraid that I will lose my business this year and that everyone will think that I was a poor manager and got over-extended."

A Level 1 response would be:
"Fred, you always worry too much. Things will turn out okay."

Such a response shows little or no understanding of Fred's message.

Neither the meaning nor the feelings are clearly recognized; therefore this is a Level 1 response. Such responses can actually be harmful because they can lead the person to feel that he cannot communicate clearly, or that his feelings are not worth listening to. Fred concludes that the people listening are not going to be helpful.

A Level 2 response would be:
"Fred, you are taking a negative attitude. You'll probably be able to work something out so you won't lose your business."

This response shows that the person listening understood at least part of what was said, but does not show that the listener is trying to understand the situation from Fred's point of view. Nor is the person at all sensitive to Fred's feelings. The individual is being judgmental in responding to Fred's concern. Partial understanding indicates a Level 2 response.

A Level 3 response would be: "It seems that you are afraid, Fred, that the possible loss of your business may make others think of you as a poor manager and a failure in your profession."

This response shows that the listener understood a major part of how Fred was feeling and why he felt the way he did. The content and related feelings were included in the listener's response. This leads Fred to conclude that the listener was understanding. It is a Level 3 response on the Understanding/Empathy Scale.

The "case method" presented here, using the Understanding/Empathy approach, is a valuable educational tool in helping the group to move beyond "advice-giving." Other situations similar to Fred's could be presented to the group so they may practice the technique of communicating at Level 3.



Other cases will help them focus their attention on the human relationships as well as on the issues involved.

Evaluation and Termination

Support groups are not meant to continue forever. Once the members' individual and group goals have been met or, with a time-limited group, once the set number of sessions have been held, the members will need to discuss

Understanding/Empathy Scale

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Little or no understanding of content or feelings; no helpfulness.	Some understanding of either content or feelings, but not always accurate; some helpfulness.	Accurate understanding of major feelings; where content is paraphrased, it is also accurate. Very helpful response.

whether to terminate or continue meeting. The group experience may be so rewarding that some members may wish to continue. This may be an excellent opportunity for reinforcement of each member's worth, and provide an opportunity for continuation of group work with more sophisticated goal-setting and problem-solving approaches.

The decision to terminate a support group should be left to the membership. If members believe their goals have been met, they may be ready to "move" on to other things. This is particularly true if participants know that the support developed among them will extend beyond the group session. When the group does disband, the facilitator may wish to make plans to supplement the group work with follow-up sessions for specific members of the group. In some instances, it may be necessary for the facilitator to refer a person to a professional or agency for more in-depth counseling or therapy.

Once the group has decided to discontinue meeting, a final meet-

ing should be planned to review what the group has accomplished, to evaluate the usefulness of the group, and to review how members can obtain further information and support.

Activities for evaluating

There are numerous activities that are effective tools to use for group evaluation and termination, and for assisting members to achieve "closure." One suggestion is to distribute a piece of newsprint and marker to each member or to small groups of members. Ask them to fold the newsprint in half and label one-half *Skills Learned* and the other half *Goals Achieved*. On the first half they are to write down the skills they have learned and can maintain. On the other half, have them list the goals the group has achieved. Allow approximately twenty minutes for this activity, then allow time for participants to share and discuss their comments with the group as a whole.

Another method used in evaluation is to use open-ended statements and have participants describe the *changes* that have occurred, what they have *learned*, and how they *feel* about the support group process and accomplishments. On the following page are some examples of open-ended sentences that can be used in this activity.

Conclusion

A support group can provide an effective setting and climate for individuals to gain information, learn new skills, and to be reaffirmed and reaffirm others. However, support groups are not for everyone. Some people cannot benefit from the give and take in such a group setting. They may not be ready to share their feelings and experiences, or may attempt to monopolize all group discussions. It may be better to approach these people on a one-to-one basis.

Also be aware that the group will not be able to solve all the participants' problems or to provide in-depth therapy. The group is a resource for people who need encouragement, reaffirmation of self-worth, and information to get through a difficult time. Persons with more serious problems should be encouraged to seek professional help from a trained counselor. Depending on the problem being experienced, people may choose a financial counselor, mental health counselor, marital counselor, etc.

There are no easy answers to family and financial problems. However, when people can share their concerns with others in the same situation it may lighten their load. In a support group, people find that they are not alone. They can learn how others have dealt with their problems and may find they are able to help others who are experiencing tough times.

The group experience may be so rewarding that some members may wish to continue.



SAMPLE EVALUATION

Changes I have observed in myself include _____

The most important thing I learned in this group was _____

I feel _____ about group members

The group did not help me solve my problem with _____

Next time I would like to learn how to _____

What I liked least about the group was _____

What I liked best about the group was _____

Allow the group approximately ten or fifteen minutes to do this activity. These open-ended statements can then be used as a discussion guide in the group.

A group rating questionnaire (scale method) may also be devised to use in evaluation. For example:
How Helpful was the Support Group? Considering the time the group has met and considering the goals of the group, do you believe that this group has been:

1	2	3	4	5
not very helpful	below average in helpfulness	average in helpfulness	above average in helpfulness	very helpful

Other questions can be developed to evaluate the degree of “togetherness” of the group, productivity of the group, and goal-setting procedures. These are only a few suggestions that the facilitator may consider using in the evaluation and termination session. Activities selected will be determined by the structure of the group and nature of the group process.

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